

## Film Viewed Sideways

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For the audience member most familiar with dramatic narratives, documentaries, and some lyrical or poetic experimental films, many of the films in this set of programs might come as a shock and a curiosity. “Why would someone make a film like this?” or “What does this mean?” might immediately come to mind. There are several answers.

The most obvious answer for some of the films in the series is that they exploit aspects of filmmaking that rest in the physical and mathematical sciences to “explore ideas”—an argument that always reminds me of a dissenter’s graffito in the Radio/Television/Film department back in the heyday of “structural film” among the MFA students: “If you want to explore space, join the astronauts!”

Not that films are incapable of being examples of or contributions to abstract reasoning, but viewers are often puzzled by such projects which seem to rely on a kind of secret or ethereal knowledge not available at first sight in viewing.

A different approach could be to justify such films as pure entertainment or eye candy. Certainly some of the examples of “flicker films” in the series could be readily understood that way: intense strobe light films in the 1960s counterculture might be both “materialist” investigations of film properties, and also mind-blowing experiences suitable to background at a rock concert or dance floor.

While this series ranges broadly through history, the core of the selection is based in and around what critic P. Adams Sitney identified as “structural film” in the late 1960s. Sitney saw a new attention to the underlying structure of a film as the means for a new generation of filmmakers who were trying to use film to examine both human consciousness and the inherent properties of film as a medium. Rather than a personal expression stemming from a mostly unconscious inner core, structural films seemed to be reasoned, precise, and thought out in advance with the actual film as the logical working out of a predetermined formula.

This kind of dispassionate and thoughtful art had close connections with the 60s trend of Minimalism in art exemplified by large canvases which seemed to be studies in white on white or black on black, or sometimes Op Art, with its reference and recycling of the perceptual science of optics. Such work fit the Cold War high art aesthetics of critic Clement Greenberg who argued that the best 20th century art took as its subject matter art itself. Thus art ends up with a high calling, an attempt to be philosophy.

Of course others read this as an attempt to evade the actual world, social reality, and ethical and political responsibility. If the purpose of art making was to simply examine the inner nature of art, then an art for art’s sake stance produced an audience of other artists, sophisticated art critics, and few others. I once asked a class what the pleasures of such films were, and one student offered the idea that seeing them gave you the pleasure

of being smart enough to understand them, knowing that others did not. We ended up calling this “smarty-pants pleasure” in the rest of the course.

There’s a certain truth to that, but not the whole story. Some filmmakers really do have an interest in the physical sciences and want to learn how to use that knowledge in making films. Science and art are not by nature opposed. For many others, the very craft of working on a film brings certain aspects of film into a sharper relief and that itself becomes fascinating. The nature of intermittent motion in projection, the material surface of the film which is so obvious when splicing films during editing, the difference between different film stocks, the shock produced by different juxtapositions in editing, and so forth, are all perfectly obvious to crafting films though they often are invisible to viewers in the final exhibition situation. Playing with those material aspects of film is something filmmakers do as part of their own education, fascination with the medium, and mastering the tools of expression.

But on another level, this can turn to navel gazing, or being stuck in the mirror image, like Narcissus. There is an audience, and while commercial entertainers see pleasing the audience as their main aim, artists can balk at that goal if it seems like selling out or selling short one’s own aspirations.

The epistemological impulse of structural film is not inherently bad; it has its roots in the very activity of art making by artisan filmmakers who are deeply concerned with their craft and their materials. But it must also be recognized that structural/materialist film in the late 60s and 70s existed in a world that included intensely activist media work and film being made by new social groups. Blacks, women, gays, and the student and antiwar movements were also using cinema to express their concerns and to not only understand the world, but to change it. In a time of political tension and change, making art about art can seem an evasion, a sideways move to avoid the ethics and moral questions of art making in an unjust world.

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